

MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S BUDGET WOES

Were they self-inflicted, or the result of a souring economy?

Brandon Rippeon, a former Republican candidate for Montgomery County Council, argues overspending has led to a fiscal mess. Saqib Ali, an outgoing Democratic member of the House of Delegates, says even Montgomery couldn't avoid pain as the economy faltered.

Rippeon's Point:

After a decade of profligate budgets and poor decision making, is it a wonder Montgomery County has financial and budgetary troubles?

Over the past 10 years, county employee salaries have increased by 50 percent, while at the same time their benefit packages have ballooned by 120 percent, this based on a recent report by the county's own Office of Legislative Oversight.

This breaks down to over 50 cents in taxpayer funds benefits county employees receive for every \$1 in salary. Compare that to the 20 cents in benefits a typical private sector employee receives for the same \$1 in salary.

While this disparity in pay packages has received much attention recently as county officials attempt to close the projected \$200 million gap for the upcoming 2012 budget, this is only part of the problem.

Spending on the importation of poverty into the county has grown at just an alarming rate as the reckless compensation packages for county employees.

Roughly 43,000 Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) students (out of a total of 144,000) rely not on their own parents to provide for their daily breakfast and lunch, but the county taxpayer at a cost of over \$22 million per year. MCPS spends over \$40 million annually on students with "limited English proficiency." This, too, funded by the taxpayer, as well as is in-state tuition at Montgomery College for our growing "sans-papiers" population.

Montgomery County Health and Human Services Agency, courtesy of the taxpayer, spends \$250 million per year on poverty-related services. For example, medical care is now provided to over 26,000 individuals, up from 8,000 individuals in 2005. This equates to over 60,000 visits to doctors' offices per year.

Add in \$30 million for the Office of Human Rights and The Department of Housing and Community Affairs, both programs to sustain poverty, and one can begin to see where all the taxpayer money goes: either to make sure Montgomery County has plenty of over-paid employees who provide services for those in poverty, or to make sure there is plenty of poverty so Montgomery

County can have plenty of over-paid employees.

Ali's Counterpoint:

There's no doubt that MoCo's government faces huge fiscal challenges in the coming years. The 2012 fiscal year has a \$200 million budget hole. And unless the economy rebounds sharply, lean times are here to stay.

Rockville's budget problems are due in part to generous public employee contracts that were signed during flush years. The worst abuses (such as rampant abuse of [disability payments](#) and tuition reimbursement by police officers) are behind us. Consensus seems to be building amongst county & state leaders to avoid making salary promises in good times and then underfunding them when the going gets tough. Councilwoman Valerie Ervin (regarded as a labor ally) has proposed a [thoughtful bill](#) that would help keep contracts affordable. Sheer mathematical realities of balancing the budget will cause an inevitable if wrenching realignment of Montgomery County's budgetary priorities in the next two years.

But the other leg of the broken budgetary stool is the staggering collapse in the national economy that has reduced prosperity for all Americans. That's a nationwide problem not due to county leadership. MoCo residents are getting laid-off and foreclosed on just like everyone else in the country. That has caused tax revenues to nosedive. Illegal immigrants have little to do with it. "Importation of Poverty"? Are you kidding me? That kind of talk is nothing but class warfare.

As far as MCPS's Free & Reduced Meals program goes, would you prefer our government save \$40 million and have those kids go hungry? I wouldn't. Harry Truman passed the [National School Lunch Act](#) in 1946 for a reason: Hungry kids don't learn well. So the federal government paid for their food. Let's not turn back the clock 64 years.